

# DANCING AT LUGHNASA

BRIAN FRIEL

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## PLOT OVERVIEW

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*Dancing at Lughnasa* is a two-act play by Irish dramatist Brian Friel. The play debuted in 1990 and received many accolades, including several Tony Awards. It was also adapted into a 1998 feature film directed by Pat O'Connor.

*Dancing at Lughnasa* is set during the summer of 1936 in the Irish town of Ballybeg. Though a fictional town, Ballybeg contains many similarities to Glenties, in County Donegal, where Friel lived until he was ten years old. In keeping with its autobiographical strains, *Dancing at Lughnasa* is framed as a memory play. The play's action takes place in the past, pausing for intermittent reflection from a man, Michael Evans. Michael recounts his childhood from a present-day perspective, musing on numerous events we never see played out on the stage.

At the beginning of the first act, an adult Michael narrates his memories of the summer of 1936, when he was seven years old. That summer, Michael lived in a cottage in the small town of Ballybeg, Ireland, with his mother, Christina, and four aunts—Kate, Maggie, Rose, and Agnes. The sisters serve different functions within the household; Maggie runs the house, Rose and Agnes knit gloves to sell in town, and Kate works outside the home as a schoolteacher. The sisters are unmarried, though all have had potential suitors. Christina receives irregular visits from Michael's father, Gerry, a charming but unreliable wanderer who works odd jobs in various locations.

Michael explains that this was the summer the family got their first wireless Marconi radio, allowing them to receive music from Dublin. This was also the summer the women's brother, Jack, returned home from Uganda, where he had been working as a missionary in a leper colony for the past twenty-five years. Michael notes that in his memory, Jack's return feels connected to the radio. Likewise, the Marconi radio serves as a kind of metaphorical stand-in for Jack's condition. The frail signal mimic Jack's malaria-sick body, and the irregular spasms of music align with his own unpredictable spurts of memory. When he arrives, Jack seems to have forgotten his sister's names and some words in the English language, since he is accustomed to speaking Swahili. He also appears to have foregone the family's Catholic faith and adopted the theological beliefs of tribes in Africa.

In Act I, the sisters express their desire to attend the harvest dance at the annual Festival of Lughnasa, a pagan celebration of the harvest. The staunchly Catholic Kate forbids them from going, complaining that Ballybeg is in a frenzy over the festival. The women wax fondly over old and potential suitors and erupt into dance when Marconi plays an Irish dance song. Michael's father, Gerry, arrives at the house, and Christina talks with him in the garden. Gerry tells Christina he will come back to marry her in two weeks, but Christina is wary of his promise. They dance in the garden while the other sisters look on. Kate denounces Gerry in a foreboding moment, sensing that "it's all about to collapse" (35). A present-day Michael confirms the foreboding atmosphere, explaining that Kate lost her teaching job soon after because the parish priest was suspicious of Jack's paganism. Michael says that although Kate was right about a lot of things, she was wrong about Gerry not wanting to marry his mother. He reveals that the two never had a formal wedding but were married in spirit.

The second act begins two weeks later, in early September. Jack's health has improved, but he remains fixated on his time in Africa. Gerry reveals that he has thought about his future and wants to join an international brigade to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Christina tells Kate that the buyer who works with Agnes and Rose will no longer accept their gloves, as a new glove factory has opened in town. Though the buyer urges Rose and Agnes to apply for work in the factory, they decide to leave home instead. Michael later learns that the sisters moved to London, where they became homeless. He reveals that Gerry was injured in Barcelona and eventually stopped visiting Christina. He also reveals that Jack died of a heart attack, Kate went to work as a tutor, and Christina worked in the glove factory. Michael says the spirit of the house died with the absences of Rose, Agnes, and Jack, and that he left home as soon as he was old enough. The play ends with a tableau of the family, drifting in an ethereal dance as Michael reflects that in memory, "everything is simultaneously actual and illusory" (71).

*Dancing at Lughnasa* explores themes of Catholicism versus paganism, pleasure versus responsibility, change versus nostalgia, and economic uncertainty. The play also explores the tension between two opposing forces: the world of duty, morality, and responsibility (aligned with Catholicism), and the escapist world of music, dance, and fantasy (aligned with paganism). While Kate represents the former, the other family members gravitate toward the latter, as a source of relief and release from their otherwise troubled lives.



## ACT SUMMARIES AND ANALYSES

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### Act I

#### Act I Summary

The play introduces its setting—a small country cottage in Ballybeg, Ireland—through the looking-back perspective of Michael Evans. Michael recalls the summer of 1936 when he was seven years old, living with his mother—Christina—and four aunts—Kate, Maggie, Rose, and Agnes. Michael relates that during this summer, the family bought their first wireless radio. They discussed naming the radio Lugh after the pagan god of the upcoming Lughnasa Harvest Festival, but the staunchly Catholic Kate disapproved. Thus, they agreed to name the radio for its brand, Marconi.

Michael also explains that during the summer, his uncle Jack returned to Ireland sick with malaria after twenty-five years serving at a Ugandan leper colony. Michael suggests that in his memory, the sound of Marconi is linked to Jack's return. Jack seems to have forgotten his sisters' names—referring to them as Okawa, his Ugandan house boy—along with many words in the English language. He also appears to have foregone the family's Catholic faith for beliefs of Ugandan tribes. Michael recalls an old picture of his uncle in British military uniform, commenting on the drastic difference between his childhood imagination and the reality of Jack's condition.

The play transitions from Michael's present-day monologue to a scene from the summer of 1936. The scene opens on the cottage interior, where Agnes knits gloves, Rose carries turf, Maggie makes mash, and young Michael makes kites offstage. The women muse about the Lughnasa harvest dance. Rose mentions a boy from the hills, Danny Bradley, with whom she is infatuated. The sisters express discomfort because Rose is "simple" and they believe Danny intends to take advantage of her. Rose remarks that her sisters are jealous because they have all—for the most part—given up on romance themselves. Meanwhile, Marconi plays occasional fragments of songs to which the sisters playfully sing along. Their playful mood tapers to a hush whenever they remember Jack.

Young Michael comes into the room with his kites and Maggie jokingly bets with him that the kites will never leave the ground. Kate comes home from shopping

and dotes on Michael, praising the kites, but remarking on their “scarifying” (8) artwork. Rose and Agnes talk about a local boy named Sweeney, who was badly burned in a ritual bonfire on the first day of Lughnasa. Kate scolds the sisters for talking about the festival, claiming it is an insult to Catholicism. The sisters tell Kate of their plans to attend the dance, but Kate forbids it, reminding them that this is “Jack’s home” (13) and they must never forget that. Jack then wanders in and out of the room, confused about who they are and where he is.

Kate brings news of people she’s seen while she was out. She mentions stopping by Austin Morgan’s store, which Rose chides her about, knowing Kate is secretly fond of Austin. Kate mentions seeing Bernie O’ Donnell, and Maggie fondly recalls a dance wherein she and her date beat Bernie in a dancing competition. Christina turns on Marconi, and Maggie leads them in a wild dance to the Irish song “The Mason’s Apron.” At first, Kate cries in remonstrance. Gradually, she resigns herself to her own private, controlled, but deeply-emotional dance. When the music suddenly stops, Kate nags Rose and Agnes for splurging their glove money on a new radio. The sisters tell her they do a lot of unpaid housework and just want to have some fun. When Christina suggests throwing out Marconi, Kate is against the idea. She claims this would be a waste of money, but the audience recognizes her argument as another moment of Kate’s concealed romanticism.

Michael’s absentee father, Gerry, arrives at the cottage. Christina goes out to the garden to meet him. Gerry tells Christina he hitched a ride to Ballybeg with a man he met in a bar who happened to be going there. He also tells Christina he saw a brown cow with a unicorn horn—a good omen—on his way to the house. Christina asks about a rumor that Gerry was teaching dancing lessons in Dublin. Gerry confirms that he taught dancing, but is now selling gramophones. He recalls Christina’s dancing and how much fun they used to have. When the song “Dancing in the Dark” comes over the Marconi, they dance together passionately. Gerry says he wants to come back and marry Christina in two weeks, but Christina remains level-headed, saying marriage is not in his nature. Gerry claims that this time will be different because all the omens are right.

The sisters watch Christina and Gerry from the window. Kate remarks that Christina’s face is contorted with happiness. She criticizes Gerry, and Agnes runs off in tears, calling Kate a “righteous bitch” (35). It’s clear that Agnes is secretly fond of Gerry. Kate reflects on the Sweeney boy burned by Lughnasa’s fire, remarking that it feels like everything is about to collapse.

Jack wanders into the room, musing about the pagan traditions he has picked up in Africa, including sacrificing roosters. He says illegitimate children like Michael are common in Ugandan households. Suddenly, Jack recalls where he is and shares a memory of Christina waving as he left twenty-five years ago. Kate is excited by his recollection, and the play pauses on this hopeful moment.

Present-day Michael punctures this hope by explaining that Kate soon after lost her job at the local schoolhouse, supposedly because enrollment numbers were down, but actually because the parish priest was suspicious of Jack's theological beliefs. Michael says that although Kate was right about a lot of things, she was wrong about Gerry, who came back to dance with his mother in a kind of spiritual union.

The play briefly resumes past-tense action as Jack picks up the sticks from Michael's kites. He strikes them together in a Ugandan rhythm and dances. Kate stops him and gently remonstrates, saying the sticks belong to a child.

## **Act I Analysis**

In Act I, Friel establishes dramatic tension between Kate's strict Catholic values and the more free-spirited paganism she observes around her. Friel also illustrates the striking similarities between Irish pagan rituals—exemplified by the Festival of Lughnasa—and the Ugandan pagan rituals described by Jack. Both Irish and Ugandans celebrate the harvest with dancing, drinking, and fire. Kate sees these rituals not only as threats to Catholicism, but to the safety and well-being of her family, whose financial and social standing is precariously balanced. She contemplates the Sweeney boy—burned by Lughnasa's fires—as an exemplar of the harm that could befall her family. At the end of Act I, she prophetically reflects that “control is slipping away; that the whole thing is so fragile it can't be held up much longer. It's all about to collapse” (35).

Kate perceives the escapist abandonment of music and dancing as a constant threat to her family's reputation, warning that the “whole countryside” will laugh at them for forgetting their age and responsibilities. She warns of the transformative powers of pleasure, noting that Christina's “whole face alters when she's happy” (33). She maligns the songs of Marconi for triggering flights of romantic fancy, chiding her sisters, “If you knew your prayers as well as you know the words of those aul pagan songs!” (35) She also recognizes her family's



dangerous precarity in extravagant purchases such as Marconi, scolding Rose and Agnes for using their glove money to purchase the radio. Friel demonstrates, however, that Kate's relationship with these temptations is more complex than her presentation. When Christina suggests throwing out the malfunctioning radio, Kate protests strongly, demonstrating her susceptibility to escapism. When her sisters dance to "The Mason's Apron," Kate initially nags them, but eventually joins in her own quietly emotional dance. This dance can also be read as a demonstration of Catholic expression: filled with heated emotion that is shamefully repressed.

Marconi also serves as a mechanism for Friel to explore memory, both through Michael Evan's nostalgia for 1930s music and the sputtering quality of the radio's transmission. The start-and-stop quality of Marconi's music playing seems to mimic the static nature of Jack's memory as he recalls fragments of past experience and English words, intermittently forgetting where he is. Michael confirms this association, with his reflection that in his memory, Jack's arrival felt linked to Marconi. Like the signal, Jack is constantly searching, wandering the house in confusion.

Jack is not the only wanderer who turns up in Act I. The arrival of Michael's wayward father, Gerry, serves both to stir and dampen the romantic spirits of the sisters. All five unmarried women speak of suitors past and present, and all—for various reasons—cannot realistically pursue them. Maggie is—by her own estimation—too old and overweight for romance. In addition to being busy with her teaching job and household responsibilities, Kate seems to admire a man above her social station. The object of Agnes's infatuation is Gerry, whom she cannot pursue for fear of hurting Christina. And Christina herself understands that Gerry could never be a stable partner, recognizing that it is in his nature to move around. The only sister who doesn't seem resigned to relinquishing romantic relationships is Rose, who is "simple," and therefore at risk of manipulation by men.

Jack is also aligned with many symbols of longing and dubious hope. Michael reflects on the romantic, saint-like quality Jack was assigned, beatifically memorialized in a twenty-five-year-old photo of Jack in his British Army uniform. Kate is eager for Jack to begin leading mass, fulfilling her image of him as an ideal Catholic. Of course, the reality of Jack's physical, mental, and ideological condition dramatically contrasts with the sisters' hopes and expectations. When Kate unpacks the quinine for Jack's malaria while complaining about the Festival

of Lughnasa, she experiences an almost Freudian slip: “I’m telling you—off its head—like a fever in the place. That’s the quinine. The doctor says it won’t cure malaria but it might help to contain it...” (11). Kate struggles to contain the “fever” of her sister’s desires and her brother’s Ugandan paganism, though by the end of Act I, it is clear that she can’t contain it much longer.

## Act II

### Act II Summary

The play’s second act begins in early September, two weeks after the events of the first act. Young Michael’s kites sit on the table, where he writes a letter to Santa Claus. Maggie teases him about how the kites never flew and asks what he’s writing about. Michael explains that he wants a bell for the bike his dad claims to have bought him. Knowing Michael’s dad will probably never give him a bike, Maggie attempts to distract him with riddles.

Jack enters the room looking healthy, but dressed in the odd combination of his army uniform and sister’s sweater. He hears church bells ring, and Maggie explains they’re coming from the high-class wedding of Austin Morgan. Jack converses much more fluently than before and strongly recalls memories. Kate asks if he’ll begin mass soon. At this remark, Jack seems confused about where he is, suggesting they summon villagers for mass with a gong. He describes the harvest festivals of Uganda, which revolve around drinking and dancing. When he cheerfully departs for a walk, the sisters whisper about how he’s changed. Kate expresses concern for their reputation.

Gerry and Christina enter after dancing around the garden. He announces he’s joining an international brigade to fight against Franco’s Fascist army in the Spanish Civil War. Kate denounces his “godless” (52) brigade because Franco is supported by the Catholic church. Gerry explains that he does not have any political allegiances, but the brigade is his best bet for a job, as he isn’t selling any gramophones. He hopes the war will bring adventure, naively declaring that it will all be over by Christmas.

Agnes returns from picking berries, but Rose is not with her. Agnes mentions that Rose was wearing her good shoes when she departed, and complaining of an upset stomach. Maggie realizes Rose has gone to see Danny Bradley in the back hills. When Rose returns home, she admits that she went to the hills with Danny

and saw what's left of Lughnasa's fires. Rose also claims that the Sweeney boy is recovering from his burns.

Christina tells Kate that a new glove factory has opened in town, depriving Rose and Agnes of their livelihood. Though urged to apply for work in the factory, Agnes knows Rose will never be hired. Instead, Rose and Agnes decide to leave home, notifying the family of their departure in a letter left on the breakfast table.

Adult Michael narrates that he tracked down his aunts twenty-five years later, in London. When he discovered them, Agnes was dead and Rose was dying in a hospice for the destitute. He learns they moved around, taking cleaning jobs, until Rose could no longer get work. They became homeless and Agnes died of exposure. Michael also explains that Jack never said mass again. Rather, Jack continued to share anecdotes of Uganda that shocked Kate until she explained his beliefs as "his own distinctive spiritual search" (60). When Jack died of a sudden heart attack, Kate was inconsolable. Gerry, meanwhile, was wounded in Barcelona falling off his motor-bike and could no longer dance. Michael eventually received a letter from his half-brother of the same name, revealing that Gerry married another woman and had a family. Michael's mother worked in the glove factory for the rest of her life, a job which she hated. Kate eventually found work as a tutor for Austin Morgan, the man she was infatuated with. Michael says he left home as soon as he was old enough, and that the spirit of the house died after Rose, Agnes, and Jack were gone.

With these grim events foreshadowed, the play returns to 1936, where the mood is still light. Maggie says she wishes she could go to Uganda, and Jack jokes that he could get one man for all of them. Gerry dances with all of the sisters, singing a lighthearted song of change: "In olden times a glimpse of a stocking/Was looked on as something shocking/But now—" (65). Jealous, Christina switches off the set.

They enjoy the last warm evening with a dinner outside. Their enjoyment, however, is dampened by ominous images. Rose emerges holding her dead rooster, which was killed by a fox. Jack emerges wearing his age-tarnished uniform. Young Michael emerges with his kites and reveals their artwork for first time: a pair of crude, cruelly-grinning faces.

As adult Michael delivers his final monologue, the actors resume positions that mimic the opening of the first scene. He reflects on memory, how it feels

“simultaneously actual and illusory...a dream music that is both heard and imagined; that seems both itself and its own echo” (71). In the background, Marconi plays “It’s Time to say Goodnight,” and everyone—even the kites—sways softly from side to side.

## Act II Analysis

As Kate predicted, change takes hold of the family—and the world at large—in Act II of *Dancing at Lughnasa*. On the familial level, there is the symbolic convergence of three different “bells”: the bell Michael requests from Santa for the bike his father never sends; the church bell, which sounds the wedding of Austin Morgan, the man Kate was in love with; and the Ugandan gong Jack suggests in place of a church bell, to summon the congregation for mass. All of these ringing bells evoke failed hopes, desires, and aspirations, giving the audience the sense that time is up.

Act II also illustrates the effects of the late-to-arrive Industrial Revolution in Northwestern Ireland. The establishment of mechanized factories displaces cottage businesses, such as the glove-making project of Rose and Agnes. As a “simple” woman (arguably with an intellectual disability), Rose is especially vulnerable. Rose cannot maintain employment in a fast-paced environment, where she would have to work long hours with dangerous machines. When Agnes and Rose refuse to work in the factory, they begin a steady process of socioeconomic disintegration, moving from low-paying temporal jobs, to joblessness, to substance-dependency and homelessness.

On the macro level of change, Act II also discusses the complexity of Irish civilian recruitment for the Spanish Civil War (made even more complex by the fact that Gerry is actually from Wales). Gerry has no ideological stake in the war and doesn’t even understand the thick Northern Irish accent of the recruiter, let alone the cause he’ll be fighting for. Kate’s politics seem equally short-sighted, as she is not concerned with conflict of fascism versus democracy so much as the fact that Franco is a Spanish Catholic. Further change (and implied moral disintegration) is embodied in the twenty-five-year-old army uniform. When Jack puts on the uniform, it is age-tarnished and in disrepair, an effigy of Jack’s saint-like British Army photograph.

Change nevertheless blends with overtones of sameness when Jack further elucidates Ugandan rituals. Maggie jokingly asks if Jack could find men for all four of them (excluding Rose) to marry in Uganda, and Jack proclaims, "I couldn't promise four men but I should be able to get one husband for all of you" (63)—an already-present dynamic that articulates itself when Gerry dances with Agnes and Maggie. Jack describes a household hierarchy of chores and duties that seems amusingly similar to the situation they currently live in. He also describes rituals of pagan sacrifice involving a rooster that resemble the rituals of Lughnasa. While Friel positions this paganism as a free-spirited counter to Kate's controlling Catholicism, it is important to note that he doesn't land in favor of any religious practice. Ultimately, the family's "last supper" of the warm season is confronted with the ominous omen of Rose's dead rooster: not a sacrifice for the harvest, simply a sad death at the teeth of a fox.

Change and sameness converge with the final scene's closing as characters very nearly resume their original positions on stage. They sway gently back and forth in a vague space between a dance and a tableau, much akin to the vague space of memory wherein everything seems "both itself and its own echo" (71).

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

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### Michael

There are two Michaels in *Dancing at Lughnasa*. The first is an adult man who narrates the play, framing the action of 1936 as a memory he recalls many years later. The second is Michael is a seven-year-old boy (the age he was in 1936). There is even (arguably) a third version of Michael that does not appear on stage but is addressed in his narration: a half-brother of his same age and name who sends him a letter in the 1950s.

Both (physical) versions of Michael are positioned in such a way that they are simultaneously present and absent in his memory, an idea which accords with Michael's reflection of memory as a gray space "between what seemed to be and what was..." (2) and a feeling that seems "both itself and its own echo" (71). The sensibility of being one's "own echo" is augmented by Friel's direction that the adult Michael "also speaks the lines of the boy, i.e. himself when he was seven" (i). Young Michael is often absent from the audience's view, making kites whose artwork is not revealed until the very end of the play. When the adult Michael narrates, he speaks from a space of futurity, foreshadowing events that extend beyond the scope of the play. As he speaks, the lights of the memory scene dim, and the movement of the actors either stills into a tableau, or assumes a slow-shifting, dreamlike quality.

Michael is unique from the rest of his family in his ability to escape from the dire circumstances that befall them. He notes that he got out as soon as he could and that "in the selfish way of young men I was happy to escape" (71). He is also unique from the other characters in that he knows what happens to the family beyond the remembered scenes of 1936. Michael explains, however, that his knowledge is far from complete, that "the scraps of information I gathered about their lives...were too sparse to be coherent" (60). He also reflects on the gauzy nature of his own memory, wherein "everything is simultaneously actual and illusory" (71).

While Friel leaves Michael's motives in revisiting this memory open to viewer interpretation, he offers numerous suggestions, including nostalgia, regret, a longing to assemble fragments of information, a desire to reconcile himself to failed expectations, and a lingering sensation of unfulfilled potentialities.

## Christina

Christina is Michael's twenty-six-year-old mother. She does not have a job or source of income and is notably the most aimless member of the household. When Michael's absentee father, Gerry, visits the cottage, she is initially wary of him, reflecting that it is not in Gerry's nature to settle down. When they dance together, however, her demeanor changes, and her "whole face" (33) is lit up by the pleasure of their physical connection.

Christina is also similarly divided in her communication with young Michael. In the beginning of the play, she is the only sister who doesn't dote on him, dismissing him as "spoiled" and "cheeky" (10). However, when Gerry returns, her demeanor toward Michael substantially brightens, and she speaks optimistically about their future as a family, declaring "You are a lucky boy and I am a very, very lucky woman" (36-37). Christina thus illustrates the power of dancing—the pagan escapism Kate fears—to transform one's perspective on her relationships and life situation.

## Kate

At forty years old, Kate is the eldest sister and assumes authority as head of the household. As a school teacher for the local parish, she is the only family member with a steady job and a stable source of income. Kate is very conscious of her responsibilities as the family's provider and she frequently assumes the role of enforcer, maintaining an environment where everyone's duties are fulfilled, everyone is kept in strong physical health, and her own Catholic values are upheld.

Upholding these values frequently revolves around controlling the behavior of her sisters when they express what Kate believes to be "pagan" desires. She prohibits them from going to the Lughnasa Festival with the argument that it celebrates drunkenness and immoral pagan rituals. She urges her sisters to comport themselves when they dance and sing along with the Marconi, chiding "If you knew your prayers as well as you know the words of those aul pagan songs!" (35) Friel suggests, however, that Kate's true fears extend beyond religion to her own deeply-harbored romantic longings. These longings are evidenced when Rose remarks on Kate's fondness for store owner Austin Morgan, and when Kate prevents the Marconi from being thrown out.

Of the five sisters, Kate seems the most strongly attached to Jack, in part because he represents hope for improving their family's reputation. She is eager to cure his malaria, telling him the town will celebrate his return as soon as he's well. She continually asks when he will be ready to deliver the mass, hoping the restoration of his Catholic faith will come with the restoration of his physical health. Her optimism is dampened, however, by the revelation that she can't truly "cure" Jack of both his fever and his adopted Ugandan pagan beliefs; the best she can do is attempt to "help...contain [them]" (11). She does so by trying to keep knowledge of Jack's condition "in the family" (49). Word eventually reaches the parish priest, who dismisses Kate with the claim that their numbers have diminished (though Kate knows that he is really just concerned about her connection to Jack).

## **Rose**

Rose is a thirty-two-year-old woman who is described as "simple" (ii). Her demeanor is sweet and childlike; she adores her sisters, wears her rain boots year-round, and has a predilection for "milk" and "chocolate biscuits" (5). To help earn extra money, she knits glove with Agnes, for whom she has a special fondness. All of her sisters, however, are very protective of Rose, believing that a local boy from the back hills—Danny Bradley—is trying to take advantage of her innocence.

Friel raises questions, however, regarding Rose's sexual maturity, even suggesting that in some ways she knows more than her sisters. She recognizes Kate's fondness for Austin Morgan, and she strategizes to meet Danny in the back hills on the final evening of Lughnasa. When the sisters try to diminish Danny's attentions toward her, Rose remarks—with a note of truth—that they are "just jealous" of her (6). Rose is, significantly, the only sister who has not given up on her pursuit of romance.

## **Maggie**

Maggie, the second-oldest sister at thirty-eight, is the family's housekeeper and maternal caregiver. She is also a playful jokester, constantly singing songs and posing riddles to young Michael. The lyrics of Maggie's songs and the language of Maggie's riddles often poetically bespeak undertones of the family's situation. For example, when she pretends to release an imaginary bird for Michael, she evokes the sensation of time and romance passing the sisters by: "The colours are beautiful...Trouble is—just one quick glimpse—that's all you ever get. And if you



miss that..." (14). With her cheerful, free-spirited demeanor, Maggie serves as a kind of foil for Kate. She also frequently serves to mitigate Kate's controlling personality as Kate's closest familial confidant.

## Jack

Jack is a fifty-three-year-old missionary priest who served for twenty-five years at a leper colony in Ryanga, Uganda. He is sent home to Ballybeg in poor health, thin and feverish with malaria. Throughout the play's first act, Jack wanders in and out of the scene as though in search of something. He is often confused about where he is and whom he is with, referring to all five sisters by the name of Okawa, his Ugandan house boy. He also struggles to recall words in English, as he is accustomed to speaking Swahili.

Jack's condition is a stark contrast to the image his family cultivated of him in their romantic imaginations. Michael references a photo of Jack in his army uniform from a period where he served as a military chaplain, remarking that he "was a hero to me...a hero and a saint to my mother and to my aunts" (8).

As Jack's health improves, it becomes increasingly clear that he has abandoned much of his Catholic faith and adopted many of the Ugandan pagan beliefs, much to Kate's chagrin. Rather than improving Kate's reputation with the local parish—as she hopes—Jack's paganism generates suspicion toward their family.

## Gerry

Gerry is Michael's absentee father who turns up irregularly to declare his love for Christina. A Welsh roamer who works odd jobs—including dance-lesson instructor and gramophone salesman—Gerry thinks of Ireland as his adopted home. His interest in Christina seems genuine, and Michael notes that though his mother and father do not share a "conventional form of marriage" (42), their dancing serves as a kind of spiritual union that extends beyond spoken language. Gerry's free spirit is diminished, however, when his legs are badly injured in the Spanish Civil War. The injury prohibits him from ever dancing again, and his connection to Christina dissolves.

## THEMES

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### **Paganism vs Catholicism**

*Dancing at Lughnasa* explores the tension between two opposing forces: the world of duty and morality (aligned with Catholicism), and the escapist world of fantasy (aligned with paganism). As a staunch Catholic and the head of the family, Kate opposes distractions from their day-to-day responsibilities, and she resents the Marconi's "aul pagan songs" (35) that lead to romantic thoughts, dancing, and self-abandonment. She opposes the traditional pagan Irish celebration of Lughnasa, referring to the back-hills inhabitants as savages. Describing the Festival of Lughnasa as a "fever" that has infected the town, Kate positions herself and her faith as the antidote for pagan desires. However, much like the quinine that "won't cure" Jack's malaria but rather "help to contain it" (11), it is clear that Kate—and the Catholicism she represents—cannot control the rising "fever" of her family.

Furthermore, Jack's descriptions of Ugandan rituals illustrate that this "fever" extends far beyond Ballybeg, Ireland, and that many of their traditions are very similar. Jack relates the celebration of a Ugandan harvest festival that revolves around drinking and dancing, much like the Festival of Lughnasa. He describes Ugandan households like their own wherein multiple women raise "lovechildren" (40) like Michael. He also (unconsciously) suggests that the binary of paganism versus Catholicism is much foggier than Kate believes it to be, and that pagan ideas bleed into Irish Catholicism. For example, Jack contemplates their deceased mother's belief in "ancestral spirits," to which Kate anxiously replies, "Mother was a saintly woman who knew she was going straight to heaven" (39).

### **Change and Precarity**

Kate's anxiety over pagan escapism and abandonment of responsibility stems from her family's precarious financial position. As a parish school teacher, Kate is the only family member with a job and a stable source of income. She recognizes that her position depends on her family's clean reputation with the Catholic church. Furthermore, she understands the importance of saving everything they

can—including the money earned from Agnes and Rose’s glove-knitting venture—and warns against the danger of frivolous spending. This danger is closely aligned with the fanciful, romantic desires that Kate associates with paganism, positioned as a cycle: if they embrace the romance of “those aul pagan songs” (35), they will forget their place in Ballybeg’s socioeconomic hierarchy; if they forget their place, they’ll begin to spend on extravagances the family can’t afford, such as cosmetics, chocolate biscuits, and the radio itself; if they become distracted by extravagances and forget their responsibilities, they will lose their respectability in the eyes of the church and community; if they lose their respectability, Kate will lose her job and they will descend even lower on Ballybeg’s socioeconomic hierarchy. Thus, Kate’s constant dread of the family’s precarity builds to its apex when she watches Christina and Gerry dancing: “You work hard at your job. You try to keep the home together. You perform your duties as best you can...And then suddenly, suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away...It’s all about to collapse...” (35).

True to Kate’s reflection, the family is dramatically altered by changes occurring on the macro level in Ireland. The late-arriving Industrial Revolution brings factories to the area, which displace the cottage glove business of Rose and Agnes. Because Agnes and Rose refuse to work in the factory, they begin a steady process of socioeconomic disintegration, moving from low-paying temporary jobs to substance-dependency and homelessness.

## **The Experience of Memory**

*Dancing at Lughnasa* is a memory play defined by Michael’s gauzy recollection of a period in his life that already felt surreal. He opens the play with reflections on the nature of memory, explaining that the strange images of his mother and sisters “screaming” and Jack “shuffling from room to room” evoked a tension between “what seemed to be and what was” (2), and that in a sense, these moments felt like “memories” even while they were happening around him. In Michael’s imagination, the Marconi radio feels “linked” (2) to Jack, and both serve as vehicles through which memory is explored. The sputtering quality of the Marconi’s music mimics the staticky nature of Jack’s recollection as he tries to separate Uganda from Ireland, Swahili from English, and past from present.

## SYMBOLS AND MOTIFS

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### Marconi Radio/Music

In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, music is closely aligned with both the old Irish pagan traditions and the stirrings of romance, excitement, and pleasure that Kate identifies with “paganism.” With its mysterious start-and-stop quality—seemingly uncontrollable despite efforts to fix the radio—Marconi seems “possessed” by spirits, enchanting the sisters to dance with abandon as though through “voodoo” (2). In keeping with this tension of “possession,” the lyrics and tone of Marconi’s songs often interact with (and sometimes influence) the mood of the scene. For example, “The Mason’s Apron”—a traditional Irish reel that would likely be performed at the Lughnasa Festival—incites the sisters to abandon their chores and dance wildly. When Gerry converses with Christina in the garden, the song “Dancing in the Dark” evokes a romantic mood and inspires them to dance passionately. As both a signifier of pagan tensions and sputtering, irregular music, the radio is notably “linked” (2) to Jack, a stand-in for his fragmented thoughts.

### Dancing

Dancing is a rich and fluid symbol in *Dancing at Lughnasa* whose associations include fun and abandonment, old pre-Christian tradition and Irish pagan celebration, excitement and pleasure, romance, hope and longing for romantic connection, and—ultimately—the atmosphere of romantic potential that has passed by the sisters. Dancing is most explicitly tied to romance through Christina’s roaming lover, Gerry, who teaches dance lessons (in a Catholic church, no less) and remarks that “everyone wants to dance” (38). When Gerry dances with Christina, the atmosphere of her life is briefly transformed, and “her whole face alters” (33), a transcendence that can be aligned with religious experience.

Michael also suggests that in some ways, dancing serves as its own social code and physical language, facilitating a kind of non-traditional union between his

parents as they move “in ritual circles...No singing, no melody, no words. Only the swish and whisper of their feet across the grass” (42). Furthermore, he insinuates that memory is akin to dancing, filled with ethereal, shifting images that move as “if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary” (71).

## Kites

Young Michael spends the first act of the play making kites. These kites serve as a stand-in for childlike hope (of flying high, of rising above one’s situation) that is frequently suggested to be a little embarrassing. When Maggie sees Michael’s kites, she tellingly ribs him about them—“God help your wit” (7)—and bets him that the kites will never fly. True to her prediction, the kites fail to take off, and in Act II, Maggie jokes that Michael owes her money. Mid-construction, however, the kite sticks are used by Jack as he beats out the rhythm of an African dance. Disconcerted both by the “pagan” dance and the escapist pleasure it represents, Kate gently embarrasses him, explaining, as though to a boy, “We’ll leave these back where we found them, Jack. They aren’t ours. They belong to the child” (42).

The artwork of the kites—crude drawings of frightening faces—is not revealed until the final moments of the play. These faces can be interpreted as facsimiles of the sisters, whose faces “alter” (33) in the midst of pleasure.

## Bikes

The “manly” (29) black bike from Kilkenny that Gerry promises Michael serves as another stand-in for childlike hope of a better future. In this case, for Michael, the bike is tied to hopes that Gerry will be united with himself and Christina as a family unit. However, the play makes it resoundingly clear that this hope will never be fulfilled. Act II establishes a tone of unsatisfied longing, beginning with Michael’s letter to Santa. Therein, he asks for a bell he does not need to add to the bike he will never receive.

Gerry, however, receives his own “manly” black bike as a motorcycle dispatcher in the Spanish Civil War (44). He ironically injures his legs on the bike, which prevents him from dancing and cuts off his bond with Christina. The bike is positioned as the beginning of the end for their relationship (and the beginning of

a new relationship in another town that results in the birth of another boy named Michael).

## Clothing

As Friel notes in the play's exposition, the plain clothing of the sisters "reflects their lean circumstances" (ii). Thus, any unusual clothing is especially noteworthy. Rose's shoes are particularly significant, as she only possesses two pairs of equally inappropriate shoes: a pair of rain boots (her day-to-day shoes) and a pair of fancy dress shoes. When Agnes remarks that Rose left from berry-picking wearing her fancy shoes, Maggie immediately knows that Rose has dressed up to visit Danny Bradley. This choice alerts the viewer to Rose's consciousness and mindful intent, suggesting she may be fully aware of Danny's physical longings and even complicit with them.

Jack's uniform—a "magnificent and immaculate...dazzling white [with] gold epaulettes and gold buttons" (ii) serves as a stand-in for the person Jack used to be, the sister's idealized saint-like image of their brother, and the impossible hope offered by the British army to the subjugated Irish. The later interpretation is suggested most strongly in the moment when Jack emerges wearing his twenty-five-year-old army suit, trying it on before Gerry leaves to join his own brigade in the Spanish Civil War. The suit appears "very soiled, very crumpled" with epaulettes "hanging by a thread" and gold buttons "tarnished," the uniform "so large that it looks as if it were made for a much larger man" (68).

## IMPORTANT QUOTES

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1. "And when I cast my mind back to that summer of 1936, these two memories—of our first wireless and of Father Jack's return—are always linked." (Act I, Page 2)

*In this opening monologue from the adult Michael Evans, he implies a metaphorical link between the Marconi radio and his Uncle Jack. With its sputtering, irregular music, the Marconi evokes Jack's experience of equally sputtering memory, as he attempts to understand where he is and to decipher English words from Swahili. The Marconi also serves as a stand-in for Jack's pagan Ugandan beliefs, inciting the sisters to wild, decidedly un-Catholic fits of dancing.*

2. "And when I remember the kitchen throbbing with the beat of Irish dance music beamed to us all the way from Dublin, and my mother and her sisters suddenly catching hands and dancing a spontaneous step-dance and laughing—screaming!—like excited schoolgirls, at the same time I see that forlorn figure of Father Jack shuffling from room to room searching for something but couldn't remember what. And even though I was only a child of seven at the time I know I had a sense of unease, some awareness of a widening breach between what seemed to be and what was..." (Act I, Page 2)

*Continuing his opening monologue, Michael Evans establishes the tone of simultaneous nostalgia and unease that defines this memory play. The surreal—yet very real—images of Michael's mother and sisters "screaming" and Father Jack "shuffling from room to room" evoke a tension between "what seemed to be and what was," creating the sensation that these strange moments felt like "memories" even as they were occurring. The exploration of sensory memory continues to be a prominent theme throughout the play.*

3. "When I saw Uncle Jack for the first time the reason I was so shocked by his appearance was that I expected—well, I suppose, the hero from a schoolboy's book...But if he was a hero to me, he was a hero and a saint to my mother and to my aunts." (Act I, Page 8)

*Here, Michael's monologue resumes in a fragmentary manner, recalling a photo of a young, healthy Jack in his army uniform that both he and the sisters uphold as a kind of icon. Michael notes that he was "shocked" by Jack's appearance because the thin, malaria-sick individual that moves home from Uganda does not resemble the photo from twenty-five years ago. Michael's reflection performatively interrupts the remembered scene from 1936. This interruption is congruent with the way Jack's arrival disrupts Michael's romantic imagination.*

4. "I'm telling you—[Ballybeg's] off its head—like a fever in the place. That's the quinine. The doctor says it won't cure malaria but it might help to contain it..." (Act I, Page 11)

*In this scene, Kate unpacks her shopping and tells her sisters about the people she's seen while going around town. She disdains the town's excitement for the pagan Festival of Lughnasa as a figurative "fever," just as she unpacks the quinine for Jack's literal fever. This moment suggests a comparison between Ballybeg's Irish paganism and Jack's Ugandan paganism. It also tellingly insinuates Kate's role as a staunch Catholic who hopes to "contain" her family's paganism.*

5. "How many years has it been since we were at the harvest dance?—at any dance? And I don't care how young they are, how drunk and dirty and sweaty they are. I want to dance, Kate. It's the Festival of Lughnasa. I'm only thirty-five. I want to dance." (Act I, Page 13)

*Here, Agnes protests against Kate's dismissal of the Lughnasa dance. Between the desperation of Agnes's tone—"I don't care how young they are, how drunk and dirty and sweaty they are"—and the mention of her age, the viewer is led to consider this dance not as any regular celebration, but a final opportunity to experience romance.*



6. "Do you want the whole countryside to be laughing at us?—woman of our years?—mature women, dancing? What's come over you all? And this is Father Jack's home—we must never forget that—ever. No, no, we're going to no harvest dance." (Act I, Page 13)

*Kate firmly prohibits going to the Lughnasa dance, fearing that it would lead her sisters away from their practical responsibilities as "mature women." She also forebodingly declares that this is "Father Jack's home," suggesting that the dance would lead them astray from their duties in caring for him. More subjectively, this line can be read as a commitment to the Catholicism embodied by Jack's iconic army photo, with the implication that "Father Jack's home" is like a church in which his faith is practiced. This reading, of course, is highly ironic, given Michael's revelation about the disparity between Jack's photo and his current condition.*

7. "The colours are beautiful...Trouble is—just one quick glimpse—that's all you ever get. And if you miss that..." (Act I, Page 14)

*Maggie plays a game with young Michael wherein she pretends to release an imaginary bird from her hands. Her performance is so effective that young Michael believes he might have seen a bird. Maggie responds to his excitement with the following line, which suggests the aforementioned tension between "what seemed to be and what was." It also evokes the sense of time—and beauty—passing the sisters by.*

8. "You'll buy it out of your glove money, will you? I thought what you and Rose earned knitting gloves was barely sufficient to clothe the pair of you." (Act I, Page 23)

*Here, Kate simultaneously scolds her sisters for spending their meager earnings on non-essential items such as the Marconi radio while urging them not to throw out the malfunctioning radio, suggesting that this would be a waste. This moment also suggests Kate's unspoken attachment to the radio and the "pagan" escapism she claims to oppose.*

9. "I wash every stitch of clothes you wear. I polish your shoes. I make your bed. We both do—Rose and I...What you have here, Kate, are two unpaid servants." (Act I, Page 24)

*Agnes protests against Kate's superior attitude, claiming she and Rose work hard and therefore have a right to spend their money for small pleasures such as the Marconi. On a deeper level, this line can also be read as an allegorical protestation of the pagan Irish against their Catholic rulers.*

10. "Don't be surprised! Everybody wants to dance." (Act I, Page 28)

*With this line, Michael's father—Gerry—confirms a rumor Christina heard about him teaching dance lessons. In keeping with Agnes's earlier proclamation—"I want to dance!"—Gerry's theory that "everybody wants to dance" speaks to more than dancing. He suggests—as Agnes does—that the desire for pleasure and romance is something universal, experienced by "everyone."*

11. "For God's sake, would you look at that poor fool of a woman? (*Pause.*) Her whole face alters when she's happy, doesn't it? (*Pause.*) They dance so well together. They're a beautiful couple." (Act I, Page 33)

*In this moment, Kate watches from the cottage window as Gerry and Christina dance. She experiences a complex progression of emotions, transitioning from righteous Catholic disdain, to recognition of Christina's joy, to admiration (and possible envy). It is important to note that Kate's recognition of joy contains undertones of fear for the way Christina's "whole face alters." This line suggests not only pleasure, but a loss of control over one's body and emotions, and Kate recurrently positions herself against such loss of control.*

12. "If you knew your prayers as well as you know the words of those aul pagan songs!" (Act I, Page 35)

*Here, Kate resumes her critical stance against Maggie's dancing and singing. With her contrast between "prayers" and "those aul pagan songs," Kate re-establishes the dichotomy between Catholic self-control and pagan escapist pleasure.*

13. "You work hard at your job. You try to keep the home together. You perform your duties as best you can—because you believe in responsibilities and obligations and good order. And then suddenly, suddenly you realize that hair cracks are appearing everywhere; that control is slipping away;

that the whole thing is so fragile it can't be held up much longer. It's all about to collapse, Maggie." (Act I, Page 35)

*After oscillating between a conflicted admiration of Christina's pleasure and a critical denouncement of pagan escapism, Kate prophetically reflects that neither position effects the course of reality, as their lives are "about to collapse."*

14. "It's like a—a picture?—a camera-picture?—a photograph!—it's like a photograph in my mind." (Act I, Page 38)

*In this moment, Jack suddenly experiences a vivid memory from twenty-five years ago, and momentarily seems to understand who he is and where he is. The dramatic timing of this moment is significant, as Kate has just recently given up hope and announced that "It's all about to collapse."*

15. "But she was wrong about my father...Because he did come back in a couple of weeks as he said he would. And although my mother and he didn't go through a conventional form of marriage, once more they danced together, witnessed by the unseen sisters. And this time it was a dance without music; just there, in ritual circles round and round that square...No singing, no melody, no words. Only the swish and whisper of their feet across the grass." (Act I, Page 42)

*In his monologue at the end of Act One, adult Michael reflects on the wordless dance of his parents and how this dance was a kind of unconventional marriage. This imagination of a language without words—and a kind of social code that extends beyond language—is readdressed in the final lines of the play.*

16. "'O ruddier than the cherry, O sweeter than the berry, O nymph more bright, Than moonshine bright, Like kidlings blithe and merry.'" (*Laughs*) Where on earth did that come from? You see, Kate, it's all coming back to me." (Act II, Page 46)

*Jack recalls English words and phrases more readily now, as is evidenced by this moment wherein an English quote suddenly "comes back" to him. Though this recollection seems hopeful on the surface, Friel suggests that its implications are more complex than Jack realizes. Wondering*

*"where...that [came] from," Jack guesses that the line is from a comic opera by Gilbert and Sullivan, a pair of British Victorian librettists who could be interpreted, herein, as stand-ins for English composure. The line, however, is actually from the opera Acis and Galatea with music by George Handel and lyrics by John Gay. As with Dancing at Lughnasa, Acis and Galatea is notably divided into a hope-filled first act and a melancholier second act. The unquoted (unrecalled) lines of the song Jack references are equally telling of the play's burgeoning atmosphere: "No lily has such lustre; Yet hard to tame, As raging flame, And fierce as storms that bluster!" In summation, the unspoken undertones of this moment reflect Kate's early anxieties about controlling the household's pagan tensions, suggesting that, indeed, "It's all about to collapse."*

17. "He's changed, Maggie...He's not our Jack at all. And it's what he's changed into that frightens me." (Act II, Page 49)

*After Jack's recollections segue into explanations of pagan Ugandan rituals, Kate expresses her anxiety that Jack has "changed." This moment confirms the underlying tension of the previous moment, suggesting that, like the unsung "raging flame" of Lughnasa, Jack's pagan passions are beyond her control.*

18. "The Industrial Revolution had finally caught up with Ballybeg." (Act II, Page 59)

*In this moment, adult Michael explains that Agnes and Rose lost their livelihood as home-based glove makers when a glove factory was built nearby. He describes this event not only as an inevitable development, but a kind of delayed reckoning for this small town that is behind the times. In so doing, he suggests the especially drastic effect of world-wide changes on communities such as Ballybeg that retain—and in many senses rely on—their old traditions.*

19. "The scraps of information I gathered about their lives during those missing years were too sparse to be coherent." (Act II, Page 60)

*This line—taken from one of adult Michael's monologues near the end of the play—is important in that it draws attention to our narrator's knowledge gaps. Friel leads the viewer to understand that memory, storytelling, and all*

*other assemblages of knowledge are fragmented by their very nature, often "too sparse to be coherent."*

20. "He never lost his determination to return to Uganda and he still talked passionately about his life with the lepers there. And each new anecdote contained more revelations. And each new revelation shocked my poor Aunt Kate. Until finally she hit on a phrase that appealed her: 'his own distinctive spiritual search.'" (Act II, Page 60)

*Michael's monologue continues to address the development of Kate's relationship with this new and "changed" Jack. Her assessment of Jack's spirituality is left open to the viewer's interpretation, proffering a question of whether her perspective on religion has evolved, or if she's simply doing whatever she can to normalize her brother's behavior.*

21. "I couldn't promise four men but I should be able to get one husband for all of you." (Act II, Page 63)

*Jack responds to Maggie's whimsical questions about Ugandan life, illustrating that many of the pagan rituals, traditions, and social hierarchies in Africa are very similar to those they know in Ireland. When Maggie asks whether or not he could find all of the eligible sisters a husband there, he responds thus. The verity of his response is demonstrated as Gerry dances with all the present sisters, performing as "one husband for all" of them.*

22. "'In olden times a glimpse of a stocking/Was looked on as something shocking/But now—'" (Act II, Page 65)

*The lyrics of this song—sung by Gerry as he dances with the sisters—playfully demonstrates the change taking place in their lives. These lyrics insinuate that Kate's Catholic control and composure will become harder and harder to maintain in a world where "a glimpse of a stocking" is no longer "shocking."*

23. "Why is a gramophone like a parrot?...Because it...because it always...Because a parrot...God, I've forgotten!" (Act II, Page 70)

*This failed joke is attempted by Maggie in the final scene of the play. The joke is a response to Gerry's comment that the artistic young Michael "isn't*

*going to end up selling gramophones” like he does. The joke is ironic on multiple levels because its punchline—which Maggie has forgotten—is that they both repeat the same thing over and over again, suggesting that Michael will in fact repeat the path of his father. After Maggie’s joke, the play’s characters also resume their original stances from the beginning of the play, repeating a version of the scene we have seen before. Her failed recollection of the punchline also comments on the fleeting nature of memory, how it often skips like a repeating record (or a malfunctioning Marconi radio).*

24. “In that memory atmosphere is more real than incident and everything is simultaneously actual and illusory. In memory, too, the air is nostalgic with the music of the thirties. It drifts in from somewhere far away—a mirage of sound—a dream music that is both heard and imagined; that seems both itself and its own echo...” (Act II, Page 71)

*In his final monologue, adult Michael continues Maggie’s suggestive thought line about the repetitive “echo” resonances of memory. This dreamily-phrased ending could be thought of as its own form of escapism, or a comment on the sensory experiences of hope, loss, and resignation.*

25. “When I remember it, I think of it as dancing...Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary...” (Act II, Page 71)

*In the final lines of the play, Michael reflects that memory itself is much like dancing. Friel leaves interpretations of this reflection up to the viewer.*

## ESSAY TOPICS

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1. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is a memory play that examines the experience of memory throughout. How is memory used as a framework in the play? What does this play tell us about the nature of memory?
2. *Dancing at Lughnasa* establishes a number of strong juxtapositions between Catholicism and paganism. How are these belief systems characterized in the play? What are some of the similarities and differences Friel illustrates?
3. What role does music play in *Dancing at Lughnasa*? How do the song lyrics comment upon (and—in some cases—interact with) the events of the play?
4. Though *Dancing at Lughnasa* creates a strong portrait of this family as a whole, each sister is shown to be her own individual, dealing with her own personal struggles. Choose one of the five sisters and analyze her development over the course of the play. How do her personal struggles enmesh with the play's overarching themes?
5. The remembered portions of this memory play are set in a very specific time: late August and early September of 1936. Michael's adult monologues, however, come from a distant, unidentified time. What is the effect of this decision on our experience of time in the play? What role does time play in *Dancing at Lughnasa*?
6. While Ballybeg is characterized in relatable and realistic ways, the town is Friel's fictional creation. What is the function of setting in *Dancing at Lughnasa*? Why do you think the author chose to construct a fictional Irish town?
7. At the end of the play, Michael Evans explains that Kate began to refer to Jack's paganism as "his own distinctive spiritual search" (60). Do you believe this quote reflects Kate's evolving perspective of religion, or is she simply doing whatever she can to normalize her brother's behavior? What does either interpretation tell us about her character (and the play as a whole)?

8. *Dancing at Lughnasa* is rich with recurring symbols and motifs, including (but not limited to): music, dancing, riddles, roses, clothing, bikes, and kites. Choose a symbol and track its evolution from the play's beginning to its end.
9. In the play's exposition and character descriptions, Rose is described as "simple." Do you interpret this term as indication of a developmental disability, or do you feel Rose's situation is more complicated? How does the perception of Rose's "simple" character define her role, both within her family and society at large?
10. From Maggie's riddles to Jack's faltering recollections of English, *Dancing at Lughnasa* is filled with references to language. The play fittingly ends with the line "Dancing as if language no longer existed because words were no longer necessary..." (71). What does this play tell us about the various functions and problems of language? How does this closing line inform our understanding of the play's language?



